CHAPTER 8

Vernacular Language and Political Imagination

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African languages came of age as textual systems at the convergence of three historical conjunctures: the colonization of the African continent, the rise of the evangelical missionary movement, and the definition of the field of comparative linguistics. In each of these three registers, Africans found themselves subject to the definitional authority of European outsiders. As a colonized people, Africans' political institutions were transformed into the instruments of despotic colonial governments (Mamdani 1996). As targets of missionary attention, Africans' religious practices were pruned, hollowed out, and redeployed as *praeparatio evangelica*, preludes to the revelation of Christianity (Peterson 2012). As subjects of linguistic reform, Africans' ways of speaking were clarified, standardized, and made into platforms for translation, printing, and publishing. For every language there were committees—the Interterritorial Swahili Language Committee, the Yoruba Orthography Committee, the Shona Language Committee—in which European experts set the standards that African writers were obliged to observe. They launched essay competitions, sponsored translations, and funded the publication of approved books. They also established the conventions that guided the orthography of African languages and published dictionaries that set the standard for vocabulary.

But there was space within the vernacular-language library for experimentation, creativity, and imagination, too. The standardization of vernacular languages and their widespread dissemination in books and

newspapers gave Africa's literate men and women a tremendous sense of empowerment. In their newly defined vernaculars they found a means by which to talk to their people, all at once. Language standardization entailed the amalgamation of hitherto regionalized vocabularies, the erasure of secret and specialized forms of knowledge, and the creation of a homogenous vocabulary. Standardized vernaculars were integrated. They were addressed to audiences that saw themselves as a coherent people. Literate men and women found in them a means of hailing their people. Writing in the vernacular was a thrilling thing: it required new modes of address, provoked new audiences, and conjured new communities. In the spreading of standardized vernaculars, a whole cohort of literate men and women found a moral and political vocation.

STANDARD LANGUAGES

The project of language standardization went hand in hand with European efforts to understand and govern the extra-European world. There was a proliferation of orthographies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as European linguists cast about for alphabets that could be used to write Oriental and African languages. The most influential alphabet was composed by the Egyptologist Richard Lepsius, who in 1855 published a *Standard Alphabet for Reducing Unwritten Languages and Foreign Graphic Systems to a Uniform Orthography in European Letters*. His aim was to "bring [foreign] languages with their literature more completely within our reach, and to increase our knowledge of the nations to which they belong" (Lepsius 1855, 23). Decrying the "intolerable confusion of orthographic systems and signs," Lepsius conceived an alphabet that would allow Christian missionaries to "furnish destitute nations, first of all, with that most important, most indispensable means of intellectual, moral, and religious culture, a *written language*" (Lepsius, 26). The alphabet consisted of Latin letters, marked with diacritics to identify sounds that were not ordinarily pronounced in European languages. The Lepsius alphabet was endorsed by a number of missionary organizations, including the Church Missionary Society, the Basel Mission, the London Missionary Society, and the White Fathers. Within five years of its publication, the alphabet had been employed in the writing of fourteen African languages, among them Ewe, Hausa, Maasai, and Zulu, and several Asian languages, including Korean and Kurdish. By the late nineteenth century, Lepsius's script had become the dominant orthography for African languages.

The Lepsius alphabet made African languages legible and accessible to a European readership. In many parts of Africa, there was already a written literature composed in Arabic letters: in Yoruba, Wolof, and other Sudanic languages there were Ajami manuscripts, and in Swahili and Malagasy there was poetry and historical writing in Arabic script (Jeppie 2014). Missionary linguists wanted nothing to do with the Arabic alphabet. Lepsius thought it essential that Latin letters should replace other writing systems, since Chinese, Arabic, and other letters "constitute a natural and almost impassable barrier between foreign and European civilization" (Lepsius, 29). All over Africa, linguists used the Latin alphabet to transform intractable scripts and languages into vehicles for evangelization. The first studies in the Yoruba language were composed by Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the great missionary bishop of West Africa. His 1843 *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* utilized Latin letters to spell the language, replacing the Arabic letters used by earlier writers of Yoruba (Crowther 1843; Crowther 1852; Ogunbiyi 2003). Crowther's spelling system set the standard for the later fluorescence of Yoruba-language literature. The Swahili language was likewise transformed in missionary linguists' hands. Ludwig Krapf, whose *Outline of the Elements of the Kisuáheli Language* (1850) was the language's first published grammar book, worried that using Arabic letters would facilitate the spread of Islam. For Krapf, it was the "Japhetic race which will and must give the impulse to the improvement of the Nilotic tribes." Arabic would be an "encumbrance on the Europeans who are, or will be engaged in the work of civilizing and Christianizing these tribes" (Krapf 1850, 16–17). Krapf contemplated using the Amharic alphabet of imperial Ethiopia to write Swahili, but settled instead on a system based on the Latin alphabet.

Africa's vernacular languages were thereby drafted into service as adjuncts to the European languages of colonial government. In their alphabets they bore a family resemblance to English, French, German, and Portuguese. They were easy for amateurs to work with. Books like A. C. Madan's *Outline Dictionary Intended as an Aid in the Study of the Languages of the Bantu and Other Uncivilized Races* (1905) furnished amateur linguists with a list of essential English-language words, arranged alphabetically in columns. Beside each word there was a space where could be written the vernacular-language equivalent. Organized in this way, it was possible to think about translation as simply a matter of finding the right words. The first missionaries to work in central Tanganyika were convinced that local people possessed "but a meagre vocabulary." But in 1881, missionary J. T. Last began to compose a dictionary for the local language, called Gogo (or Chigogo). He ruled a notebook in parallel columns, with English at the left

and Gogo at the right, then he "wrote down that I thought were the most suitable [English] words from A to Z in their proper places, and . . . put [native words] in the places allotted to them" (Last 1881). By 1894 missionaries had translated the Gospels into Gogo, and by 1900 they had a Gogo grammar book ready for printing. Standardization rendered a hitherto meager language into a rich material for religious literature. "Their language is remarkably complete," wrote a missionary in 1909, "their traditions are such as to amply repay the time and effort required to master them; while their parables and tribal laws are assets of no mean value" (Westgate 1909).

There had not hitherto been a standard vocabulary for Gogo or for any other African language. Oral elocution was composed for specific audiences and specific contexts. In Haya country, in northwestern Tanzania, eminent people lived behind screens that kept their private lives separate from commoners' gaze. There was a whole class of nouns that referred to objects intended for esoteric use (Rascher 1955). There was circumlocution, especially when speaking of controversial matters (Yankah 1995). In Rwanda, poetry performed before the king was often incomprehensible to its listeners, and indeed to its performers. In Yoruba performers of ~~*oriki*~~ (praise epithets) compressed the complicated and winding biographies of their subjects into condensed syllables and allusive references (Barber 2007). Speakers and listeners had to develop competences. The orality of a language did not make it comprehensible to its listeners. Many people disagreed about what words meant, especially in places where there had not hitherto been a large state to consolidate languages and cultures. In central Tanganyika, Anglican missionaries working to document the Sagara language were discomfited to find that Sagara people could not agree on the basic elements of grammar and vocabulary. "Wasagara are a very dependent people, both as regards language and policy," wrote a frustrated missionary in 1888. "They show signs of adopting Kigogo on the west, Kimasai on the north and northeast, and Kiseguha on the east and south east" (Wood 1888). This missionary thought Sagara people's flexibility was a sign of moral turpitude. In fact it was a normative aspect of communication. Many translators must have shared the frustrations of Miss Davis, in southern Uganda, who struggled to compose a vocabulary book in the Chiga language. "It is an endless task," she wrote. "The variation in the dialects spoken in the different parts of [the region] are so many that one may greedily light on a new word only to find it contradicted the next minute by someone who says he has never heard of it" (Davis 1927).

None of this swayed missionary translators from the core convictions that guided their work. They thought themselves obliged to render

Christian scriptures into the vernacular. That had been one of the chief points of dispute during the Protestant reformation: the Articles of Religion of the Anglican Church, adopted in 1562, called it "plainly repugnant to the Word of God" to have prayers or sacraments administered "in a tongue not understanded of the people." German Protestants similarly thought of the vernacular as the language of the *Volk*, indelibly connected with a people's unique and foreordained way of life (Meyer 2002). This theology made language standardization into a religious vocation, not simply a technical task. As a missionary working in central Kenya put it, "I feel it is our bounden duty to the Kikuyu Tribe that we, who have reduced their language to writing for them, should give them a standardized spelling to hand down to future generations" (Leakey 1933). Languages had to be consistent, internally coherent, and standard. That is why the work of Bible translation entailed, first, the production of dictionaries, grammar books, and standardized orthographies. These were mechanisms by which words' meanings could be rendered stable and transparent. As the committee that standardized the orthography of Luganda put it in 1947: "People who speak one language should all spell it in one way" (Uganda African Literature Committee 1947).

In practice, the work of standardization entailed the creation of hierarchies between different spoken languages and the elevation of one variant as the standard form (Errington 2001). In this way, language standardization was necessarily partisan. It involved discrimination. Some people—who linguists called the majority—found themselves in a privileged position in relation to the committees that were organizing African languages. Other people, who lived at a distance from the mission stations where language committees worked, found their ways of speaking made into variants from the norm. The standard for Xhosa vocabulary and grammar was set by the Ngqika people living in the vicinity of the Glasgow Missionary Society station at Lovedale. The standard for Ewe vocabulary was set by the coastal Anlo-speaking people, whose particular idiom was taken up by German missionaries (Meyer 2002). Once the dictionaries and grammar books were in place, though, all of these contingencies were rendered invisible, and the standard became the ruler against which other uses of the language were measured. When in 1904 the missionary T. O. Westgate sat an examination in Gogo language—it was the first-ever written examination in Gogo—he failed spectacularly, earning only six marks out of one hundred on the translation section. Westgate excoriated his examiners, arguing that the Gogo dictionary against which his work was judged was full of mistakes. His examiners responded by maintaining that the Gogo language he had learned had been adulterated, since the "natives from whom he had

learned were not pure Wagogo" (Briggs et al. 1906). Westgate was obliged to submit himself to the standard form. After two further years of study with different teachers, he passed the exam. He would go on to translate several books of the Old Testament into the Gogo vernacular.

Rev. Westgate failed his Gogo examination because Gogo—like most African languages—was not already a coherent and integrated system. Seen from the point of view of the examiner, the standard seemed readily available: it was there in the dictionary and the grammar book. But outside the pages of the book things were more complicated. There were many people who, like Rev. Westgate, found themselves unwittingly rendered incompetent by the process of standardization (Irvine 2015). Language standardization was productive of ethnic and cultural differentiation. Even as it produced a lingua franca, it also produced dialects.

PRECARITY AND PRESERVATION

It was the experience of becoming an outsider that inspired excluded groups to campaign for recognition: for their own languages, their own dictionaries, their own grammar books, their own Bibles. That is why the process of language standardization—which was meant to consolidate languages—always seemed to occasion demands from ever-smaller language groups. In western Kenya, linguists working to find an orthography and a vocabulary for the heterodox Bantu languages of the region formed the Luhya Language Committee in 1940. Here, as in many other parts of Africa, translators were guided by an axiomatic premise: that underneath all their variety, people belonged naturally to distinct and coherent ethnic communities. As the missionary responsible for Luhya language standardization put it,

> The reason for seeking a common orthography for the Abaluhya is the realization that they are one nation. In all our decisions we should recognize this fact, and consider the nation as a whole. (Appleby 1943)

By the mid-1950s, the committee had published a book about Luhya customs and traditions, a collection of proverbs, and several books of the Bible in the Luhya vernacular. All of it was, from the start, the subject of a great amount of controversy. A Maragoli Society was created among southerners in 1943. Its leader argued that the Committee's Luhya publications were composed in a specific idiom that his people did not comprehend. In the north there was a Bukusu Language Committee, whose members sought to

defend their people's distinctive manner of speaking. "The words in most Luhya [reading primers] are outside the child's vocabulary," they argued. "Luhya words are only found in the classroom's cupboard." The Bukusu Committee asked for a government-funded language committee of its own, and for the publication of a book on Bukusu grammar and vocabulary (Bukusu Language Committee 1953; MacArthur 2012).

A great number of languages were, as in the Bukusu case, constituted as acts of resistance to the enfolding cultural power of the majority. They were creations of a people who, finding themselves marginalized by the standard language, sought to access the machinery of standardization in order to define and defend their ways of speaking. The most vociferous campaigns to defend linguistic and cultural locality were occasioned by British efforts to promote a Swahili lingua franca in eastern Africa. The language was spoken widely in Tanganyika, and British missionaries thought it to be a divine provision. "It appears to be a miracle that this language has developed throughout the centuries," one of them wrote (Williamson 1942). In 1925, Tanganyika's Director of Education convened a Committee for the Standardization of the Swahili Language in Dar es Salaam. The committee sorted through the whole vocabulary of Swahili, deliberating over the spelling of words and determining, for example, that "hurricane" should be spelled *dhoruba* and not *dharuba*, and that "respect" was *heshima*, not *hishima* (Report of the Committee for the Standardization of the Swahili Language 1925; Johnson 1925). In 1927 the British government proposed to make standard Swahili the language of instruction in schools throughout eastern Africa, hoping to use the language to promote integration among Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika. "Here we have an inextricable confusion of tongues, not only different languages but languages belonging to totally different groups—Hamitic, Nilotic, and Bantu groups which are not even geographically separated," wrote Uganda's governor. "The language of one group must be imposed upon the people of the other groups" (Governor of Uganda 1927). African advocates for Swahili were confident about the language's integrative powers. Swahili "is the only language capable of bringing all peoples, white and coloured, of different districts, provinces and territories in touch in East Africa," argued the president of the Society for the Study of Swahili. "This is a great linguistic blessing that nature has bestowed upon the inhabitants of the East African territories" (Kihere 1954).

But many East Africans saw Swahili as a vehicle of cultural and linguistic dispossession, not a blessing. In Kenya, the men of the Kikuyu Central Association linked government efforts to promote Swahili to a general crisis in cultural reproduction. "Rinse out your mouths with water, you people

of today, rinse them and recall how we were accustomed to speak formerly," wrote a contributor to the Kikuyu language journal *Mwigwithania* in 1928. "Unless you think about it quickly, your ways of speaking will become changed and you will become Swahilis" (Njuguna wa Karucha 1928). Contributors to *Mwigwithania* argued that Swahili would distance Kikuyu people from the taproot of culture. One contributor conjured up a nightmare scenario. He described a Kikuyu husband who had married a Swahili wife in one of eastern Africa's towns. When the man, homesick for his native culture, told his wife "tie your loads, because tomorrow we are going to my home," the wife and children "joined forces and said to him, '*Where* are we to go to? . . . If you want to go to your home you can go by yourself' " (Muchikari 1929). Swahili deprived Kikuyu people of the moral and cultural orientation that the vernacular could provide. Uganda's activists were similarly exercised about the threat that Swahili posed to cultural locality. Missionaries argued that Uganda's vernacular languages—not Swahili—ought to be the priority, since Swahili was not widely understood within the protectorate. Besides, many Ugandans scorned Swahili as the language of an itinerate and unimpressive people; they said "The Swahili are all right, but who are they?" (Willis 1931). Many people insisted that Luganda or English, not Swahili, should be the language of education and government. "Swahili is, in my opinion, a bulldozer language," argued a Ganda memoirist. "Hear any European army officer addressing an African—the language would be Swahili. But it is not the language for friendly talk. Who would drink pepper if there is sugared tea?" (Peterson 2012, 83).

What animated all of these defensive projects was a pressing feeling of endangerment. Virtually from the very time they were codified, African languages were said to be under threat, needing protection from the bulldozer power of a cultural hegemon, endangered by the amnesia and delinquency of the young. This feeling of fragility arose from the particular social position that the first African writers of the vernacular occupied. They were Christian converts, schooled in mission stations. They knew themselves to be dislocated from native ways of life, and they felt it was their duty to preserve the old customs against loss. As one of the contributors to the Kikuyu journal *Mwigwithania* put it,

> You who read see that the other nations write down everything that was done long ago, that so the children born now may know what the people of former times were like, and what their customs were. . . . Rouse up and let us seek out all of our good customs quickly, for if we delay much longer we shall [have difficulty in finding them], because the old people of our mothers' and fathers' generation who know all of these things are dying out. (Muigai 1928–1929)

The first literate people felt themselves to be at the edge of a radically different epoch. That is why, in most African languages, the first books to be published by African authors were collections of proverbs, folk tales, or praise poems. Texts like these were created by people who used the medium of print to record ways of life that were in danger of dying out. Among newly literate men there was an urgent effort to capture oral wisdom, put it on the page, and make it available for future generations (Lonsdale 2005). From the beginning, African writers saw writing as a form of preservation. Buganda's parliament resolved in 1917 that Prime Minister Apolo Kagwa should create a written description of "all native customs that he considered should be maintained," so that government officers could recognize and protect them (Buganda Provincial Commissioner 1917). The resolution was the legal impetus for Kagwa's career as Buganda's greatest autoethnographer. The first book composed in Xhosa by an African author was an 1876 collection of folktales (Opland 2004). The earliest written literature in the Sotho language was *Mekhoa le maele a Basotho*, the "Customs and Proverbs of the Sotho," authored in 1893 by Azarieli Sekese (Maake 1992).

Men like Azarieli Sekese and Apolo Kagwa saw themselves as preservationists, protecting fragile oral wisdom against the threat of loss. But the textual genres they created were, in fact, quite new. Oral discourse had been tailored to the specific audiences to which speakers addressed themselves. In Yorubaland, the performance of historical discourse was differentiated by gender and status. Women generally performed ~~*oriki*~~, praise epithets that were addressed to a specific recipient and his household. Men performed *itan*, narrative history, which set out explanations for obscure ~~*oriki*~~ and offered a context. In central Kenya, oral performers relied on audiences' specific knowledge of ecology and environment. *Ndaĩ* were pithy riddles that Kikuyu men and women competed to interpret. The relationship between the riddle and its answer was never transparent: riddlers played on double meanings and took advantage of metaphors. The answer to the riddle "In your place there is a lily and a castor oil plant," for example, was "Boy and girl." The lily—a deep-rooted plant—was like a boy, who stayed close to home upon his marriage; the girl, by contrast, was like a castor-oil plant, a cash crop whose produce was to be traded away. Kikuyu *ndaĩ* were addressed to people who had specific knowledge about agronomic economies, who had closely observed the qualities of plants and people, who knew how things grew and how they were harvested (Peterson 2012, 23–24).

The preservationists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took these obscure puzzles and put them on the page, where they could be enumerated, standardized, and circulated to a wide and integrated

audience. The first collection of Kikuyu proverbs, published in 1939, was composed by a cadre of Catholic schoolteachers (Barra 1994). In this and in other collections, the obscure Kikuyu *ndaĩ* were stripped of their demanding specificity and recast as moral wisdom, available for the whole of Kikuyu people to learn from. In a similar way, the earliest Yoruba-language historians used their texts to integrate and explain hitherto oblique forms of oral knowledge. As Karin Barber has shown, historical works like I. B. Akinyele's *Iwe itan Ibadan* put the obscure ~~*oriki*~~ poems alongside the narrative histories, using the technique of contextualization to explain the oddities and profundities of the poetry (Barber 2009). Akinyele's book was written for a readership that was homogeneous and integrated, not divided by gender or class, a readership that regarded its past as culture, belonging to the collective totality. Composed in the homogenized vocabulary that Bishop Crowther had defined, Akinyele's work was addressed to—and helped to conjure up—an audience that saw itself as a coherent Yoruba people (Peel 2003).

PRINT AND MORAL REFORM

The creation of printable vernaculars gave literate people a political vocation. Writers of newly defined vernaculars could regard themselves as addressing an internally integrated, biddable audience. They had at their disposal an infrastructure with which to hail their people, all at once. Here, newly visible, was a constituency that could be mobilized. The mission stations where they learned to read and write were also the incubators for the first African newspapers. The first African-run newspaper in Uganda, *Sekanyolya*, was edited by Sefanio Sentongo, who had learned the business while working on the missionary newspaper *Ebifa* (Scotton 1973). South Africa's first African-run newspaper, *Imvo Zabantusundu*, was published from 1884 by John Tengo Jabavu. He had begun his career as editor for the Presbyterian missionary newspaper *Isigidimi sama Xosa*. For literate men and women there was a palpable sense of excitement about the possibilities that this new mode of communication could offer. "There is no joy equal to this of having a little book in Kikuyu," wrote a contributor to the journal *Mwigwithania*. In the newspaper "the Kikuyu will be able to give advice to each other, so that the people of our country may agree together" (Albert 1928).

Their command over the new infrastructure of communication endowed Africa's literate men and women with the proprietorship of

their people's culture. They saw themselves as editors. By putting the customs and traditions of their people on the page, literate men could see what needed to be amended. In 1944 the newspaperman Eridadi Mulira had an early-morning dream about the reorganization of Buganda's government. The ideas, he said, "came as if someone was dictating from an unseen source." Shortly thereafter Mulira formed the African Cultural Society. The aim, he said, was to "take all culture by the horn and in the end try to produce a synthesis of culture which would be our own" (Mulira n.d.). For Mulira as for other editors, the work of cultural reform arose from the prior labor of entextualization. That is why the newspaper was essential. It was the venue wherein the generality of a people could be remonstrated with. The linguist Benaiah Ohanga thought *Ramogi*, the newspaper of the Luo Union, ought to encourage the "elimination of the conditions which make for the persistence of superstitious and diabolic beliefs, particularly witchcraft in all its forms" (Peterson 2012, 121). On *Ramogi*'s pages, contributors chronicled a range of social ills and debated techniques by which to bring about reform. In September 1949, for instance, a contributor asked Luo people to "abolish the shameful habits of Luo women: smoking the burning side of cigarettes; wearing short dresses; putting too many pins in their hair; buying fish bones in foreign hotels and being employed as *ayahs* [nursemaids]." He also complained about men who played guitars in brothels and talked to each other in the Kikuyu language instead of Luo.

Here was the machinery for the production of African culture. In most African languages "culture" was a novel word. It was defined as part of the same process by which literate men sought to consolidate, assess, and reform their people's habits. When in the 1930s the first Kikuyu autoethnographer, Stanley Kiama Gathigira, came to write about the "culture" of the Kikuyu people, he had to invent the term *mĩikarĩre*, derived from the verb *-ikara*, "sit" or "stay," a term that implied a place where people dwelt. *Mĩikarĩre* are "ways of staying." The word appears to have been Gathigira's own creation—it does not appear in any printed material until 1933, when Gathigira brought out *Mĩikarĩre ya Agĩkũyũ* under the auspices of the Church of Scotland Mission. It was a winding summary of Kikuyu people's divergent ways of life, stressing the unity that underlay all of the outward diversity (Gathigira 1933). "Culture" was likewise a late arrival in the Yoruba language. Neither Crowther's 1843 vocabulary nor his 1852 dictionary offered a definition for the word. The terms that did refer to "customs" or "habits" were associated with an individual's preferences, not a collective way of life. Thus ~~*is<subdot>e*~~ was defined as "character, action,

custom, fashion." It was not until 1913 that "culture" surfaced in the Yoruba vernacular. In that year, a dictionary published by the Church Missionary Society offered *riroko* and *oju lilà* for "culture" (Church Missionary Society 1913). The same dictionary offered ~~*is<subdot>e*~~—hitherto an individual's disposition—for "custom." Here we can see evidence of Yoruba writers' efforts to develop a vocabulary with which to amend their people's ways of life. In Yoruba and other African languages, "culture" was constituted out of literate men's earnest efforts to address an audience that was extensive and integrated, an audience that shared a language and a heritage, an audience that needed instruction.

There was an overlap, infrastructurally and demographically, between the audiences that Africa's moral reformers addressed and the tribes that colonial government thought Africans belonged to. The policy of indirect rule elevated chiefs as the authorities within the localities that they governed and made the vernacular language into the idiom of local government (Mamdani 1996). Colonial officials in Africa were convinced that "a man's native speech is almost like his shadow, inseparable from his personality" (Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies 1943). It was "only through wise use of the mother tongue" that "clearness of thought, independence of judgment, and a sense of individual responsibility" could be "developed at the start" (Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies 1930). British education policy therefore emphasized vernacular-language teaching during the first six years of school; only advanced students were exposed to English. The Bantu Education Act in South Africa was the fullest articulation of this policy of linguistic enclosure. After its adoption in 1953, the readership for vernacular-language texts expanded dramatically (Maake 1992). South Africa's racial regime created an impressive architecture for the study of African languages: there were lectureships in phonetics and in Bantu languages in all the major universities. In 1977 the South African state established autonomous language boards that worked within each of the ethnically defined "homelands." The boards' task was to standardize vocabularies, prescribe books for schools, and clarify the orthographies of African languages.

In fact, the vernacular was always more than an instrument of governance. The audiences for African-language literature was always larger, more variegated, and less available than the architects of official language policy could recognize. Africa's languages were constituted as textual systems at the very edge of a new era, and they were the media for shockingly ambitious intellectual and political experiments. African writers were always working to expand the range—in vocabulary and in geographic

space—of their languages. Some people had breathtaking visions. When in 1946 the Kenyan schoolmaster Benaiah Ohanga visited Kampala, he read through an assortment of newspapers and surprised to discover that his own language, DhoLuo, was "akin to the Lango dialect" of eastern Uganda. Ohanga made a tour through Uganda, meeting with members of the Alur Language Committee and with the leadership of the Acholi Association. In his report he set out a table comparing the vocabularies of the languages of eastern Uganda and western Kenya, and concluded by recommending that an interterritorial Luo language committee should be established (Ohanga 1946). Ohanga foresaw a future in which Luo would rank with Swahili and Hausa as one of the preeminent lingua francas of Africa. His career was dedicated to the promotion of a cultural bloc—the Luo—whose borders did not cohere around the embankments of indirect rule. In his language work he was marshaling a people who could be East Africans, not natives of a particular place; whose vernacular language crossed borders and made alliances possible; whose vocabulary joined cosmopolitan communities together. Here was a language of the world.

OUTREACH AND LITERARY EXPERIMENTATION

The vernacular was never the language of a locality. Colonial officials thought it was, and they sought to box Africans into the containers of apartheid and indirect rule. But African entrepreneurs were always expanding what was sayable in their native tongues. They were folding in new words, melding languages together, trying out new things. Vernacular languages were never frozen in place. The Kikuyu language, for example, is a composite; in the distant past, its speakers borrowed the most elemental of their words from Masaai pastoralists and Dorobo hunter-gatherers. In the twentieth century, the architects of Kikuyu political community avidly borrowed from English, transposing the vocabulary and procedures of British bureaucracy into vernacular terminology and creating trustworthy political institutions with these new instruments (Peterson 2004). In Kikuyu and in many other African languages, *Wanderwörter* were an operational part of the vocabularic apparatus (Gordon, this volume). They reflected and enabled a field of cross-cultural experimentation and exchange.

The impulse to reach out and expand the constituencies for African languages led some writers to engage in ambitious innovations in literary form. New genres emerged and were developed and transformed.

Some genres became part of the library; others were dropped (Barber et al. 2006). The first Xhosa-language novel, *USamson*, was composed by S. E. K. Mqhayi and published in 1907. Its author clearly saw novel-writing as a form of politicking. At the time the book was composed, he wrote, "we were busy organizing people in order to be able to speak as one voice in political affairs" (Opland 2007). The novel was a means of conjuring a whole people's cultural and social world, all at once. The novelistic voice allowed the author to distance himself from his own persona and speak in the voice of another, to parachute into a different life. It was a means of finding a common ground. The first Yoruba-language novel, the *Life Story of Me, Ṣẹgilọla*, was published in serial form in the newspaper *Akede Eko* during the 1920s (Barber 2012). Its author was the newspaperman I. B. Tomas, a member of the city's small African elite. Writing in the bawdy voice of Ṣẹgilọla, a dying ex-prostitute, Thomas took delight in remembering and recounting the songs that Lagos people had sung, the events they had witnessed, the personalities they had known. Here was a text that Lagosians could, regardless of class or education, take pleasure in. In its evocation of a whole people's historical experience, it helped to constitute Lagos as an integrated cultural and political field.

Similar experiments were taking place all over the continent, as the writers of newly standardized vernaculars sought to reach out and expand the foundations of their political communities. The clergyman and educationalist John Dube was particularly avid in his literary and political innovations. His Zulu-language newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* ("Dawn of Natal") was full of educational columns about science and religion, society news, and other material that would interest the upwardly mobile Christian *amakholwa* ("readers") of Natal. But while the newspaper's intended audience was closely connected with Natal's educational infrastructure, Dube also claimed for himself an important intermediary role: a spokesman for a whole people. For Dube, as for the Yoruba writer I. B. Thomas, the fictional mode allowed the located, situated author to speak in the voice of another. In 1906, for instance, Dube published a poem entitled "Amagunyana's Soliloquy" (Dube 1906). At the start of the poem, Amagunyana identifies himself as a Zulu warrior—"in these swarthy veins doth course the blood of ancient kings from Sheba until now"—and in subsequent stanzas he describes with great relish the slaughter of a lion and chronicles a bloody battle fought between his *impi* and an enemy army. In the latter part of the poem, Amagunyana expresses his befuddlement at the Whiteman, newly arrived with "that assegai of his, which hurls so fast the hurtling iron ball." He finds himself deprived of the wild game he has once hunted and turned

off the land on which he had once subsisted. He is, moreover, made subject to a foreign civilization.

> I hate his most unnatural paths; his
> Close right angled corners and hot walls. The
> Den in which he lives is prison small.
> How little is his earth to me! I scorn his
> Most effeminate ways, his fretful timecard,
> His too fine food, his chafing raiment and
> His eternal work. My home is all the
> Vast horizon wide, my couch is earth, my
> Blanket quilted stars: while as to raiment,
> Half a pelt is plenty for a lifetime.

The poem concludes with a warning to white cultural imperialists. Amagunyana admits that, in some distant future, the Christian god might prove greater than the Zulu god, but when that day comes, "I will do him homage and serve Him, and in the manner which He had fashioned me. But not in theirs."

Amagunyana speaks from a fixed position: he is the voice of unreformed Zulu masculinity. There is no inner conflict, no dynamic appraisal of a changing world. There, on the page, Amagunyana appears as a representative for a particular way of seeing the world. It is not clear who actually composed the poem, since it bears no authorial signature (Christison 2010). That is the point. Whether as editor or as author, Dube—the son of a Methodist preacher, educated in the United States, member of the tiny minority of literate Zulu people—was reaching across a cultural and educational boundary within his own society and giving voice to another person's experience. Dube's own hand had rarely held an assegai. But on the printed page he could disappear and ventriloquize another person's experience. Like I. B. Thomas, Dube found in fiction a means of aligning himself with a larger constituency. This was a political maneuver, for by it Dube claimed authority as interpreter of the native mind. It was also the impetus for fiction. In 1930 Dube published the first Zulu-language novel. It was titled *Ujege, Insila KaShaka*, or "Jeqe, the Bodyservant of King Shaka" (Maake 1992). The novel is a historical romance about the life and travails of a young Zulu warrior, Jeqe. In the Amagunyana poem we can see Dube experimenting with authorial voice, trying out a character, speaking for the unlettered Zulu masses, pushing out the boundaries of his newspaper, staking a claim on a wider readership.

This is how African languages expanded, how (some) languages became "macrolanguages." Amagunyana, the befuddled Zulu warrior, and Sẹgilọla, the repentant Lagosian prostitute, were creations of middle-class male authors. One spoke for offended rural values; the other was the voice of the urban crowd. Both characters were produced out of their creators' urgent effort to widen audiences for which to write, to represent new experiences, to draw new voices in. African language movement was not (only) the fruit of generalized social processes. The expansion of African languages was, for some people, a vocation: for newspapermen, it was a sales strategy; for moral conservatives, it was a vehicle for reform; for political entrepreneurs, it was a means of reaching out to new constituencies.

A CRISIS IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

The avidity with which African intellectuals were pursuing these literary and political opportunities helps explain why efforts to rework African alphabets generated such controversy. In 1927 the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IIALC) published its *Practical Orthography of African Languages*, which propounded a wholesale renovation in the orthography and spelling of the over 500 languages used on the African continent. The scientists of the IIALC found the diacritical marks with which the Lepsius alphabet had marked African vowels to be "psychologically noxious and practically inconvenient," imparting a "blurred outline to words and thus [impairing] their legibility." And, in any case, African writers were inclined to ignore Lepsius's diacritics: in Yoruba, huffed the IIALC's linguists, the horizontal line with which Lepsius had marked the "open" e had been transformed into a vertical line or a dot (International Institute of African Languages and Cultures 1927, 4). The IIALC linguists proposed a phonetic alphabet for use in African vernaculars. It featured an array of novel characters: ʃ for the sound "sh"; ŋ for the velar sound "ng"; ʋ for the bilabial "v"; and ɣ for the voiced velar fricative. The Institute's language primer divided the tongue and nose into different regions, describing how each action of the vocal apparatus produced different sounds (Westermann and Ward 1933). IIALC linguists boasted that the phonetic alphabet allowed the European to dispense with the necessity of native instruction when learning to read and speak African languages. From basic phonemes, students would build up a vocabulary until they could "say all the sounds of the language with ease in all kinds of combinations." In 1927, the British government of the Gold Coast mandated that all publications in Twi, Fante, Ga and Ewe should use the new orthography. In 1929, the

colonies of Nigeria and Sierra Leone accepted the IIALC's recommendations for several major languages, including Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo. By 1933, the IIALC's phonetic alphabet had been imposed on many of Africa's major languages, including Acholi, Dinka, Luganda, Mende, Kpelle, Shona, Sosso, Malinke, Zande, Xhosa, and Zulu (Smith 1934).

These orthographic innovations generated debate across the continent, as African writers contended with European phoneticians about the future of African languages. To many African writers, the stakes were clear: the phonetic alphabet would render vernacular languages unfamiliar, even unreadable, to literate people. In the Kikuyu language—to take one example—the IIALC had proposed to replace the Kikuyu vowels ĩ and ũ with the symbols ɛ and ə, while the velar consonant ng' would be replaced with the letter ŋ. The proposal had enthusiastic backing from Kenya's colonial administration, which adopted the IIALC alphabet in 1933, making its use compulsory in all government-sponsored schools. At the Presbyterian mission station at Tumutumu, Kikuyu teachers and students raised furious objections when the orthography rules were outlined at a public meeting. Missionaries reported that most of them were angry about the exoticism of the new orthography. No other Kenyan languages, least of all English, used the new letters. The IIALC letters would "make their language look odd and moreover degrade it," missionaries reported (Tumutumu 1934). At an Anglican mission station, older men feared that younger men who learned the new letters would earn better jobs than they (Beecher 1934). Women, too, thought "those who had learned to read and write with much sorrow will be prevented from reading their New Testaments to their children." At a Baptist mission station a group of Kikuyu teachers complained that the new letters would "isolate" Kikuyu from other languages, making it look "strange and incomprehensible" (McKendrick 1934). So vociferous were these protests that the Kenya government was hastily forced to withdraw the new orthography rules.

Remarkably, no one was particularly concerned about the clarity of the new orthography. Nor did anyone comment on the accuracy with which it signified Kikuyu phonemes. What was controversial about ŋ, ɛ, and ə was their potential to set young and old people, and men and women, against each other. Moreover, the new letters set Kikuyu apart from English, making the language "look foolish." Where IIALC linguists were herding African languages into the dead-end of phonetics, Kikuyu thinkers were using print vernaculars to build bridges between disparate peoples (Peterson 2004).

Similar arguments played out across the African continent, as literate entrepreneurs sought to defend the coherence of the vernacular languages with which they were addressing their people. In South Africa, where the

new phonetic letters were imposed upon Xhosa, Zulu, and other languages, angry attendees at a 1936 Conference on Literature for the South African Bantu complained that the new alphabet was "designed to help Europeans oust Africans from those forms of employment in which knowledge of a Bantu language is essential." The new letters were said to "transform Bantu languages into White men's languages," while also "dividing the old from the young in Bantu life" (quoted in Maake 1992). Phonetic letters deprived African writers of the ownership over their own languages. Seen in this way, the IIALC alphabet was a form of expropriation. Sol Plaatje—probably Africa's most widely read journalist—published a string of editorial letters complaining that the white linguists who had devised the new alphabets had entirely ignored black writers of the languages concerned. "European linguists should pave the way and lay down a uniform spelling for at least a few of their own languages," Plaatje argued, before imposing phonetic letters on African languages (Plaatje 1976). In East Africa's Luo language, phoneticians proposed to introduce the phonetic letter ŋ to signify the velar consonant "ng". The University of London linguist who propounded the innovation thought it "unfortunate" that "political issues threaten to blur what should be a straightforward linguistic matter" (Tucker 1947). But for Luo intellectuals, phonetics was never removed from public affairs. The Luo Language Committee averred that the "Roman alphabet was entirely satisfactory for the purpose of recording the Luo language," and argued that "it was quite unnecessary to introduce any further symbols" (Luo Language Committee 1945).

Today, the orthographies of African languages are populated with the relics from past initiatives. The Kikuyu language abounds in the diacritical marks that Richard Lepsius had defined; in Ewe the phonetic symbols of the IIALC predominate. Yoruba writers continue to use the dots that Samuel Crowther devised. More than other infrastructures in postcolonial Africa, orthography has been resistant to overhaul, redesign, and repurposing. In the nineteenth century, African languages had been inducted into the Latinate alphabet of colonialism through the Lepsius orthography. Lepsius's letters allowed missionaries to transcribe African languages, standardize their vocabulary and spelling, and make them regular and available for use in translation projects. All of this entailed distortion, compression, and simplification, as hitherto dynamic languages were shoehorned into premade templates. It was from this transformative work that new political constituencies came—quite suddenly—into view. Entrepreneurs like I. B. Thomas, John Dube, and the men of the Kikuyu Central Association made haste to hail their hitherto unbiddable compatriots, creating new forms of address that could speak to a collective whole. That is why they

resisted orthographic reform. Phonetic letters rendered the infrastructure of collectivity into a laughable gibberish.

CONCLUSION

In 1986, the eminent Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o famously announced that he would henceforth write entirely in the Kikuyu language. Ngũgĩ argued that vernacular languages grow directly out of the historical experience of a people; language is "inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific relationship to the world," he wrote (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986). In fact, the relationship between a particular people and a particular language has never been straightforward. Writers of vernacular languages were not spokesmen for already-established cultures. The most exciting experiments in colonial Africa's intellectual history happened in African languages. Shona, Yoruba, Gogo, Kikuyu, Zulu, and many other African languages were lingua francas, created out of the machinery of language standardization. For the African men and women who learned to read and write in them, vernacular languages were powerful tools with which to do politics. It was a vertiginous sense of possibility that animated creative people to try out new things, compose new genres, and cultivate new forms of authority. That is the place from which the vocations ~~of both~~ the moral reformer and the literary genius came.

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